WORKING CLASSES IN EUROPE

Every Country Has Its Problems and Its Peculiar Conditions--- Astonishing is the Power Vested in "Upper Classes"

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Inquiries reach me from various sources in America relative to the conditions of the working classes in Europe. The questions as put are not easily answered. They are nearly all too general, and in answering them I can only give for the most part either impressions only or my view of facts as seen broadly. Naturally, however, when in my own special field of labor organization I feel the more sure of all the grounds for any of my statements.

In the letter I wrote after being in England only a week I spoke of coming in contact there with "a social atmosphere, situation and conflict an ocean apart from ours" in America. This sense of being in another world, and again another, and still another, came upon me as I traveled from country to country. Under each government there appeared a new set of social problems that, for the time at were uppermost, reflecting the passing stage of the political, religious, or economic development of the people affected. In all countries necessarily the deeper questions affecting wealth, its production and distribution, formed a common theme for discussion. Associated with the privileges of wealth, in the eyes of the classes in revolt, are the hereditary privileges of the "detainers of wealth" both in social life and law making. That is, caste in Europe signifies not only social exclusiveness but whatever of feudalism has not been abolished.

To the American it is astonishing how much vested power remains in the hands of the "upper classes" of Europe. In nearly all countries, to be a Republican, or the same thing, a Democrat, is to be a 'malcontent." The fundamental articles of political faith to the American citizen are regarded by rank and wealth in the old worlds as social heresies. To be "to the King"—or Kaiser, or Emperor, is the test of a 'faithful subject." Hence, the closely knit rings of the titled nobility, with their hordes of dependents, parasites and imitators, are ranged against the rising mass of the people.

In the German army, for instance, are nearly thirty thousand officers. Few of them can afford to champion the cause of the "lower orders of society." From their supercilious bearing in public and from common reports as to their class prejudices and manner of life, precious few ever think of doing so. The working classes regard them as fomentors of war, allies of the aristocracy, willing servants of the capitalists in time of labor disputes, and enemies of the social progress that comes through peace. The very fact that marriage is forbidden to a German army officer unless he or his intended wife has a stated income, aside from his pay, "sufficient to maintain one of his rank," points to snobbery, parasitism, and fortune hunting. Thus, from every point of view the German army officers form one of the main buttresses to the feudal conception of society as against the democratic or American system. Between the commissioned officer and the common soldier is an immeasurable chasm. On contemplating it the observer learns what is signified in Europe by the word caste.

The hatred toward the socially privileged classes entertained by the masses in monorchial countries is voiced just as frequently in condemning their hereditary class powers as their hereditary wealth. Their very titles, paraded before the public, nauseates democracy The democratic newspapers boycott not only these titles but also mention of the combines and goings of their vain-glorious bearers. It is to be remembered that the German soldier is such by compulsion; he has not, like the American soldier, voluntarily taken his place, nor are the officers, as are more than half in our army, promoted from the ranks or transferred from civil life. Similarly, the high posts in the public service, instead of being the gifts of the people, are still frequently rewards to favorites of the powerful families. With this fact comes the insistence upon social distinction by the well placed, distinctions carried by a pettiness of spirit into the commonest relations of life. In Germany, "Herr Professors" and "Frau Doctorinen," and in Italy "Commendatore" and "Cavalier" are thicker than "colonels" in Kentucky, with the difference that they expect to be taken seriously as "upper class" social luminaries. In England the habit of calling a salaried man in a commercial house by his surname, "Johnson," or "Bobbs," or "Smith," while the youngest scion of a stockholder is "Mr." indicates the subtleties of caste that for a life time may irritate a man with a man's rights and feelings.

In France, it is not only servants who are expected to address the upper caste individual in the third person—"Monsieur," instead of "you"; the janitors of Paris have struck against this custom of the empire. In Great Britain non-payment of members of Parliament by the State is a negation of the rights of the masses of wage-earners to be represented by men from their own ranks. To a prevailing measure the House of Commons is, as commonly observed, a gentlemen's club—the word gentleman to be taken in the English sense of a high-caste man, and not in the American sense of a manly man. The first, second, third, and fourth class cars on European railways do not merely indicate varying costs in a journey; they mark off strata in society. The fact that army officers and certain high-grade government functionaries have the right to travel in first class cars at third class rates is used by the democrats to illustrate the parasitic privileges of aristocracy in general. I witnessed an instance in which two respectable looking women with a child were objected to on entering a second class car by a haughty and over-bearing man, though they apologized for taking the last seats in the compartment. "They are servants," he said, as if they were animals. "They have no right to be seated with us." The habitual tone of the conservative European press when dealing with special questions suggests the idea that he wake-workers are the dependent wards of the employing ciass; therefore, the assertion of the latter of their supposed rights is a form of treason. The street cars of Paris and other European cities have first and second class compartments. The one empty or nearly so, the other jammed.

In America we are taught that all citizens should have equal rights, and that the man who will not stand up for his rights is unworthy of citizenship; in Europe, powerful, if not in all countries the dominant, element of society defend the rights of kings as divine, advise the poor to be satisfied in "the station in which God has placed them," teach that the separation of state and church is a sacrilege, and assume that the aggressive, upward movement of the masses is a peril to society.

This difference in the prevailing sentiment toward democracy I regard as the first point to be made in comparing the conditions of the wage-workers in Europe and America. A complete change in this respect must be the forerunner in Europe to a general social progress. More than any other factor the labor organizations are working this change. They are evolving a triumphant democracy.

The political disabilities of the European working classes also mark the incompleteness of the abolition of serfdom. As in the feudal time, power in most countries is in a large measure still in the hands of a set of hereditary or proprietied bosses, whatever their titles. In Hungary on account of the property qualifications, not one wage-worker in twenty has a vote. Hungarian workingmen who have been in the United States and have returned to their native country can, from their own experience, make comparisons between the two governments on the points affecting the wage-worker as citizens. Those I met invariably began by showing the differences in the suffrage. The sentiments of the masses have but a small influence on the Hungarian government. Their efforts through labor organizations to promote their welfare are constantly hindered by interference of the authorities. The common school question, long ago settled in the United States favorably to the working classes who were capable of protecting their own interests through the ballot, cannot be grappled with by the Hungarian working people because they are without the ballot. Four-fifths of the so-called public elementary schools of the country are still denominational.

The average Englishman would probably maintain that while Hungary represents the lowest level of European society with respect to the citizen's rights in voting and to a free schooling, England is at the highest level or very nearly the highest. But, in the larger English cities from twenty-five to forty per cent. of the wage-workers have no vote on any public question whatever. They fail in residential tax-paying or other qualifications. A workingman, in all other ways qualified, may lose his vote for two years by removing from one municipality to another only a few miles away. Plural voting gives property an advantage over mere man. The distribution of seats in Parliament is by no means yet exempt from rotten borough features. Apart from voting for members of Parliament and city councilmen, the masses of English voters have no direct influence over public officials. The democrats among them have to put up with the standing offense of royalty and the lords. And in England to speak up for free and secular education in State-maintained schools is to classify oneself as a radical.

In Germany, however advanced the common schools, their relation to "higher" education is not what it is in America. It is not common, as here, that wage-workers procure for themselves a college education with direct connection with the common school course. As to the effectiveness of the ballot, if a fair apportionment of seats were made, the socialists and other radicals of Germany would at the next election increase their membership in the Reichstag by perhaps fifty per cent. Aside from voting for members of the Reichstag, the German workingman has little or no influence on those who govern him.

In Austria the trade unionist has by the letter of the law no legal status. The act of 1870 on combinations, forbids workingmen's unions to accumulate funds to be used in labor disputes. Consequently, the trade unions, as labor organizations, do not pay strike or lockout benefits. The members take care of this branch of their work through "free organizations, of course, but the union members are the only ones who commonly do. Members of the union are obliged to pay dues to the "free organization." Here is a legal force impossible to the working-classes of the United States. It makes one of the widest differences between the conditions of the workers in our own country and conditions to be found in Europe.

The European Workingmen's identification book is a badge of his still existing serfhood. While in America any one may freely roam the country over, in most countries in Europe the laborer must be prepared to produce the police or on applying for employment. At the Paris Congress of his "legitimation" book on demand of the International Secratariat one of the protests drawn up related to the arbitrary action of the Prussian police in turning back at the frontier Austrian laborers going to seek work in Prussian-Germany, or in opposing upon them both entrance and police taxes. In Italy, the laborer's book, besides giving his character as a workman, as seen by his successive employers, states whether he has ever been in prison for any cause whatever, for more than ten days. The "labor agitator" subject to police hounding is thus liable to be effectually squelched.

It is through the exercise of a man's rights—his personal rights and his rights as a citizen—that in time he may attain to their full extent his economic rights. Hence, in comparing laboring class conditions in Europe with those in America, I have placed, first, some consideration of the extent to which, what we regard as the fundamental rights of men are exercised in the old world and in the new.

Americans have manhood suffrage. By it they may, if they will, amend Federal or State constitutions, change all their law-makers and officeholders, and speedily bring the laws up to the mental and moral level of the majority. Not even in England can the masses do as much. The House of Lords, among other obstacles, stands in the way. If royalty is not regarded as one of the obstacles it is because royalty effaces itself. The British nation as a whole seems disposed to tolerate the conventional figurehead of kinship, so long as it remains nothing more.

Americans exercise the right of devoting their lifetime to their own purposes. On the continent of Europe every man in the masses must give up years of his life to compulsory service in the army. Under some governments the poorer and more ignorant and helpless man the longer is his term of service. Exemptions go to the favored classes. An endless stream of wrongs and infamies flows from from militarism as carried out by the ruling classes in the great powers of Europe.

Americans are not taxed to support religious denominations to which they are opposed. This can not be said of the "subjects" of the British government. State religious, or the usual alliances between church and state, have been one of the prime causes of the revolutionary sentiment throughout Europe.

Americans enjoy the right, at least, to an elementary education. The praises of the American school system are heard among the wage-workers in all countries of Europe. The national schools of England as compared with the common schools of America are not equally in the service of all the people. Differences arise from sectionalism, caste, organization, and conception of the purposes of the schools. To hear an Italian, speaking disconnectedly in English acquired in America, of the American school swstem and contrasting Italy's methods with the American, is to hear a lesson upon the rights of children, as much to be relished by Americans as it should be profitable to Italians.

American workingmen assume the right of organization as a matter of course. In nearly all continental countries the right is hampered with police or other regulations against which trade unionists rebel. In some countries, as in Hungary and Austria, the right is only encompassed by trick and subterfuge. In Italy and Germany it has been gained and is maintained only through constant struggles. Labor organizations in France, legitimate only since 1884, fight constantly against compulsory incorporation, and similar attacks upon a just liberty.

Americans exercise the right of free assembly. What this means seems difficult some times for foreign bred, naturalized American citizens to understand. But in actual practice, immigrants to this country from Russia, Spain, Austria, Hungary, Germany and Ireland can bear witness to America's larger liberty in this respect. No where in the world may men assemble freely to mob a man's house or person or to preach violent revolution; but in America men may meet and devise over-turning the government and expelling from office its heads by ballot, and not lose their standing as conservative citizens. In the countries named they would be classed as dangerous extremists.

Americans practice right of movement from place to place without let or hindrance which is not known in Europe. A laboring man in America when traveling may feel that he is a man; in Europe, he is presumably a possible vagrant, pauper, or subject for police surveillance.

Americans have a right to trial by a jury of their peers that is rarely known to workingmen in European countries. Judges, not elected by the people, are harsh interpreters of teh law when trying the poor and defenseless, the opponents of the privileged classes. The savage attitude of German magistrates toward the socialists is proverbial; the severity of English judges in cases of poaching or similar petty offenses against the property exhibits a settled principle of putting defense of possessions above consideration for human beings; the travesty of a trial for Ferrer proved to what lengths monarchy is capable of going in judicial or military murder of its opponents.

Americans exercise a great, though frequently overlooked, right in supervising their public servants and making them aware of the possibility of dismissal on wrong doing. In Europe, members of the titled aristocracy may be worthless to the community, flagrantly immoral, opponents to general progress, self-interested promoters of war, social pests from many points of view, and still retain power as law-makers and stand well otherwise.

And finally, Americans have constitutionally guaranteed a free press and the rights of free speech.

The European social reformer is often confused regarding the American political and economic situation because he cannot understand that much that he has yet to struggle for has in this country been accomplished. The basic prniciples of liberty are here recognized in the law. The principle of equality before the law is established. If all the logical results from these principles do not always follow, the fault lies with those American citizens who do not or can not, defend their rights as freemen should.

The next letter of this series will be devoted to general remarks on the economic condition of the European wage-workers.

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